

Women's Concerns

Report

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Women and spiritual direction

Psalm 63 presents spiritual direction's basic goal—to seek God. Psalm 63:1 states, "O God, you are my God, it is I you seek; for you my body longs and my soul thirsts . . ." The image of body and soul together in this search reflects the holistic approach that must be present in our spiritual journey as women.

I am convinced that we long for a spirituality that keeps body and soul together. But our Christianity has been contaminated by a Hellenistic philosophy that dichotomizes humanity's reality, separating body and soul, placing more importance on the soul and defining the body as negative. If we go back to the rich sources of Scripture such as the Psalms, Song of Solomon, Job or Proverbs, the body is presented as the place where we feel God. We find God in the midst of our pains and joys.

In this issue of the *Report* we look at spiritual direction, just one of many expressions of spirituality. In the search for God, many women have learned that an essential step is finding themselves. Women have described this process as looking in a mirror and seeing themselves as they are seen, or looking through different rooms of their lives, or taking off layers, or as simply undressing and seeing their naked selves as loving and beautiful. Seeing ourselves as God sees us is a process of self-discovery.

Although some women have chosen a male spiritual director, women often find it necessary to walk through the garden of wonders accompanied by another woman who will offer energy and courage to confront the unfrontable, to change the unchangeable and to do the undoable, that is, to love themselves as God loves them.

In this issue Mary Beth Lind and Susan Klassen talk about their choices to simplify their lives. They've formed their own new definitions of the established discipline of spiritual direction. They have found God's presence in the simplicity of daily chores and in beauty.

Judy Albrecht Bunting, Barbara Mast and Nancy Brubaker tell how they have found fulfillment in their programs of spiritual formation.

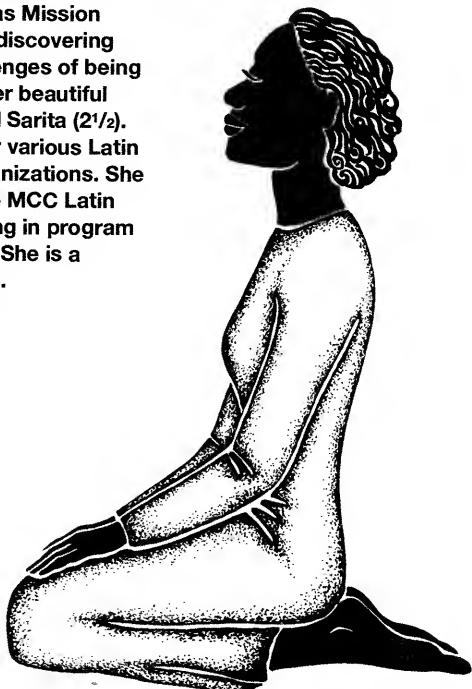
The traditions of Mennonite service and Catholic contemplation come together in a conversation between Mary Lou Houser and her spiritual director. Marlene Kropf presents five reasons why Mennonite women have gone to Catholics to quench their spiritual thirst.

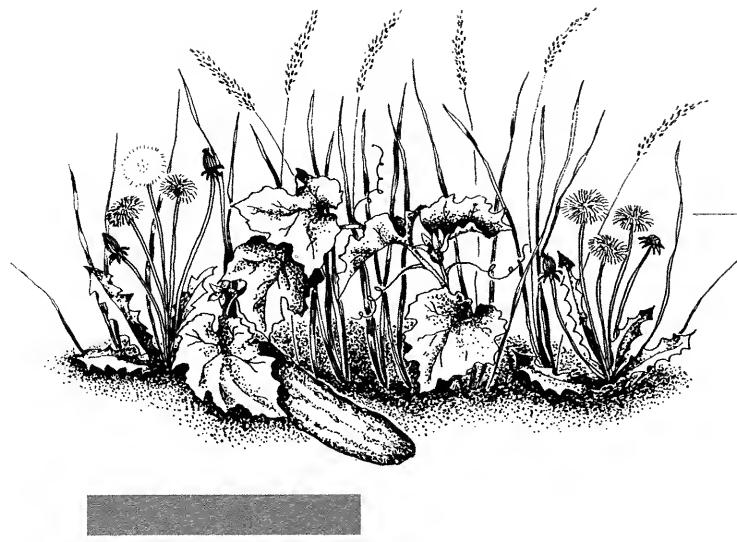
This *Report* would not be complete without including practical exercises that engage both the body and soul. These exercises are an invitation to search for ways to hear God and to feel God in all of our being. Claire Ewert-Fisher intertwines her own story with the spiritual exercises that have brought meaning to her life.

I believe the goal of spiritual direction is not only to reach for the sky, but to dig deep into the well of my own life, to find myself, to discover God smiling at me, and to be touched by Her in order to be all I am meant to be. We are daughters of God, created in Her image, and what a wonderful image that is!

—Elizabeth Soto, compiler

Elizabeth is a member of Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster. Her family recently completed a three-year term in Colombia under Commission on Overseas Mission (COM). She is currently discovering the pleasures and challenges of being at home full time with her beautiful daughters, Yentli (5) and Sarita (2½). Elizabeth has written for various Latin American Christian organizations. She volunteers weekly at the MCC Latin American office, assisting in program for Cuba and Colombia. She is a member of the MCC U.S. Committee on Women's Concerns.





by Susan Classen

Cucumbers in the weeds

At a recent MCC team meeting one of the volunteers asked with refreshing candor, "If I go to visit you in your retreat center, what will you do to me?" We all laughed but I appreciated his bluntness. Many wonder about the terms "retreat" and "spiritual direction" which have become more common in Mennonite circles in recent years.

I work with MCC in Nicaragua providing spiritual accompaniment to volunteers in Central America and Mexico. My home is a small retreat center where individuals come for rest and reflection. As I began fixing up the old abandoned house that has become home I struggled intensely with the question, "How dare I create an atmosphere of beauty and rest in a community where my neighbors scarcely have enough food?" It was tempting to think about going elsewhere so that I wouldn't be constantly reminded of the contradictions. But the reality of poverty exists whether I'm confronted with it or not. I want to live my life not escaping reality but immersed in it. So I deal constantly with small contradictions like being able to put plastic under my leaky tile roof to catch the drips while my neighbors have to move their beds every time it rains.

The community where I live provides an atmosphere that forces me to deal with two key spiritual issues—pain and beauty. Richard Rohr writes that both pain and beauty pull us out of our tendency toward individualism. When confronted with pain and suffering, we want to *do* something. Beauty also draws us out of a self-centered focus. The grandeur of beauty reminds me that the world doesn't revolve around me and that I'm one small part of something larger than my individual life.

"Spirituality is about opening our hearts to the suffering that breaks God's heart and nurturing the beauty that expresses God's creativity."

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As I live among my Nicaraguan neighbors, I'm faced with the pain of poverty and environmental devastation. Creating a life-giving atmosphere in this arid part of the country requires hard work, imagination and faith. My efforts to literally bring beauty to birth in the destroyed soil reflect my long-term commitment to nurture life in and around me. Spirituality is about opening our hearts to the suffering that breaks God's heart and nurturing the beauty that expresses God's creativity.

Are retreats that offer solitude and space away from our normal activities an escape from reality? They can be, just as any activity that provides distance and perspective can become an escape. Novels, exercise, movies, sports, etc. can be either healthy ways of stepping back from other activities or unhealthy ways of losing ourselves. The purpose of quiet reflection is to insert us into the reality of God's Spirit who is alive and active in and around us. Quiet reflection can provide the distance and perspective we need in order to hold life's contradictions in creative tension.

"Spiritual directors" are those people in our lives who help us recognize God's Spirit at work. They are people we turn to when we long to listen more closely to God. Mennonites have only recently begun using the term "spiritual direction" but the concept of spiritual accompaniment isn't new. We naturally turn to people we respect because they model listening to God in their own lives.

A friend expressed concern that having a "spiritual director" may be another escape, a way of sidestepping personal responsibility. Her concern is valid. Talking to someone else about our relationship with God makes us vulnerable, and any intimate relationship carries the possibility of unhealthy dependence whether it's with a friend, a spouse, a spiritual director or a counselor. It's important to recognize that spiritual directors don't interpret the Spirit's direction *for* us. Rather, they listen *with* us. Spiritual directors with wisdom and experience will recognize the signs of unhealthy dependence and point us back toward God.

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Perhaps describing a recent experience is the best way of communicating how I understand spiritual direction. A friend who was cutting the overgrown weeds in my yard called for me to come see what he found. I went outside. Hidden among the weeds was a cucumber vine. He pointed out a perfectly-formed, ready-to-cut cucumber. My heart rejoiced as I picked it, not only because I like cucumbers but also because the incident speaks to me of God.

I tend to overlook God in ordinary, everyday life. I take events and people for granted or, worse, I judge them as weeds to be uprooted. But there, among the weeds, a cucumber is growing! It took a friend to point out to me what had been there all along just waiting to be discovered.

Spiritual direction helps us become more conscious of God's presence in every aspect of life. God rejoices when we recognize the Spirit's all-pervasive presence and takes delight when we finally find the cucumber in the weeds! It's humbling to let go of the tendency to think I should be able to recognize the cucumbers without needing friends to point them out. Yet God has created us in such a way that we best recognize the nudging of the Spirit as we listen with other people.

Margaret Guenther writes, "Everyday events are the means by which God tries to reach us." Her simple statement highlights two key elements of spiritual direction: 1) God wants to reach us because God longs for relationship with us; 2) God is present in every aspect of life. Ordinary, often overlooked events are God's invitations to relationship.

Different traditions use different terminology to describe our spiritual search. The ways we express our longing for God change with time and circumstances. But the basic concept is universal and unchanging. God longs for relationship with us and seeks every means possible to draw us close. Spirituality is about listening and responding to that longing.

Susan is a church and faith development worker living in Patastule, Nicaragua, a small village of about 35 families. She attends the Iglesia Menonita Betania. She also provides pastoral support to about 40 MCC volunteers in Central America and Mexico. She has served with MCC since 1981, first in Bolivia and then in El Salvador.

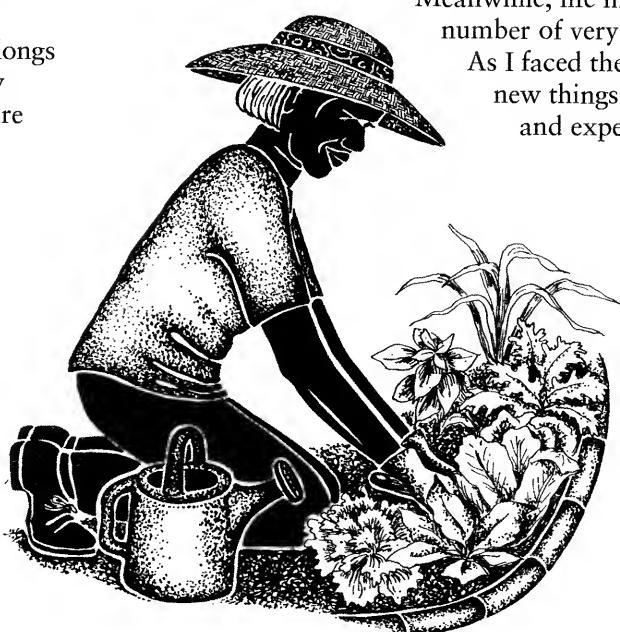
by Nancy Brubaker

Coming full circle

When I look back on my young adult years, I realize I was a terribly driven person. The number of things I expected to accomplish in a day was staggering. Doing things, and doing them well, was the measure of my value in this world. I was overly concerned with what others thought of me and whether I was doing everything well enough to be a worthwhile person. While I'm glad that I have been able to start coming to terms with some of my compulsions, I also see that my way of being in this world enabled me to make it to my 30s with a decent sense of self.

At some point, though, my deeper, authentic self began to rise up and make herself known. I became terribly hungry for something, but I wasn't sure what it was. Eventually I "happened" to come across a book about silent prayer and meditation—something I knew nothing about but recognized as being what I yearned for. I began to move inward in response to God's invitations to explore new territory.

Meanwhile, life hit me with a number of very difficult crises. As I faced these in light of the new things I was learning and experiencing, I began



to see cracks in my “doing it all” facade. My inner and outer worlds were merging in new ways, and I wished for a safe place to try to talk about what was happening to me inside. When I heard about spiritual direction, I was drawn to the possibility but didn’t know anyone to go to. Unsure about the idea of seeing a stranger, it took me several years to finally begin direction.

At first, I wasn’t sure what to say when I met with my director. She didn’t have an agenda that I had to follow, and I was a novice at expressing my feelings or talking about my experiences of God. Besides, I wondered whether she would think I was crazy.

My fears about revealing myself in the direction relationship began to give way to the obvious fact that it was helping me to deepen my spiritual life. Eventually I came to realize that the purpose of revealing myself was for *my* benefit, not my director’s. Her role wasn’t to tell me what to do, what to believe, or how to be, but to support God’s unique dance with me. It was really God who was directing me. My director encouraged me to notice God’s ways of being with me and to respond to God. She reminded me that, as in any relationship of love, it’s important to share my real self with God—what I felt, thought and wanted. God was interested in these things.

I began to feel safe enough to explore my faith questions, my anger and doubts about the church, my inability to conform to expected beliefs. I slowly became more peaceful about who I was and what God was doing with me. I accepted that there probably wasn’t going to be some final state of being in my spiritual journey. Rather, the point was the journey itself—saying “yes” to the authentic experience of life as it comes to me, moment by moment.

I believe that God can be found in every experience of life, because God relates to me as the bodily human being I am. The encouragement to notice the ways I experience God’s presence with me, and to try to put that into words, has been one of the most precious gifts of spiritual direction. What is God like for me amidst the various delightful, painful and routine happenings of my life? What is it like when God holds me as I grieve? How do I feel connected to others and the earth? When I express my feelings to God, how does God respond? Where in my body do I sense God’s movements?



These are the kinds of questions that help me to deepen my awareness of God in my daily life. Surprisingly, the answers to them are already present in us—we just need to learn to notice them. As I grow in my capacity to notice these answers and to share myself with God, I become more able to receive the love that God waits to give me.

It may sound as if spiritual direction encourages an individualistic, lone-ranger kind of Christian life in which one heads off into uncharted mystical territory seeking personal “highs.” But there is nothing more compelling than the experience of God’s unconditional love to move me out in love to my family, to the earth, to my church community and to the world. As with any spiritual practice, the value of nurturing an experiential relationship with God must be shown by its fruits. Am I growing in love, hope and joy? Do I care more than I used to about the well-being of others and the earth? God’s life within us leads to healing in relationships and to worthwhile work. It makes us laugh and enjoy ourselves and others. We participate in God’s love not for ourselves alone, but for the joy and well-being of all.

Another facet is particularly applicable to women’s experience. I believed that Jesus invited me to a life of self-giving love. Yet I thought that loving others somehow involved a denial of my own needs, that I could love others without loving myself. My deepening spiritual life

"Spiritual direction is not intended to be the bedrock, nor the centerpiece, of one's spiritual life. That is God's role!"

has put me face-to-face with questions of my own worth, potential, needs and desires. As God helps me to stand up and take my unique place in the scheme of things, my self-giving is becoming less muted by unhealthiness and personal neediness. Finding myself unconditionally accepted by God enables me to give and receive love with greater freedom.

Out of my growing trust in God's life in me, I long to let my unique gifts be shared. It's thrilling to me to think that I have a way of being in this world that is uniquely my own, a purpose no one else can fill. My little self is needed by God and the world!

Gradually my love of nurturing spiritual growth in others grew into a desire to prepare myself formally to do spiritual direction with others. As I loved to nurture my four children and my flower and vegetable gardens, I felt this desire as the next step of love.

I am now in a master's program in spiritual direction at Chestnut Hill College and am finding delight and fulfillment in offering spiritual direction to others. People are hungry for a meaningful spiritual life. For many, this is simply not being found in the institutional church. One of the strengths of spiritual direction is that it is not tied to a particular religious institution. People who yearn for a deeper experience of God, however they may envision the divine, will find that spiritual direction can help them to deepen their relationship with God, freeing them to grow into all that God created them to be. My growth includes a renewal of my commitment to the church and a gradual reclamation of personal meaning in Christian symbols and beliefs. There was a time when I could scarcely have hoped for this.

Spiritual direction is not intended to be the bedrock, nor the centerpiece, of one's spiritual life. That is God's role! But held lightly, it's a meaningful help to many, including me, who seek a deeper intimacy with God.

Nancy lives on an extended-family farm near Lancaster, Pa., with her husband, Dean, and their four children, ages 11 to 17. Nancy is a member of Covenant Mennonite Church, a small house church. She is a homemaker and a graduate student in spirituality and spiritual direction at Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia, Pa. Gardening is one of her favorite pastimes.

by Marlene Kropf

What is the attraction?

Mennonite women and contemplative spirituality

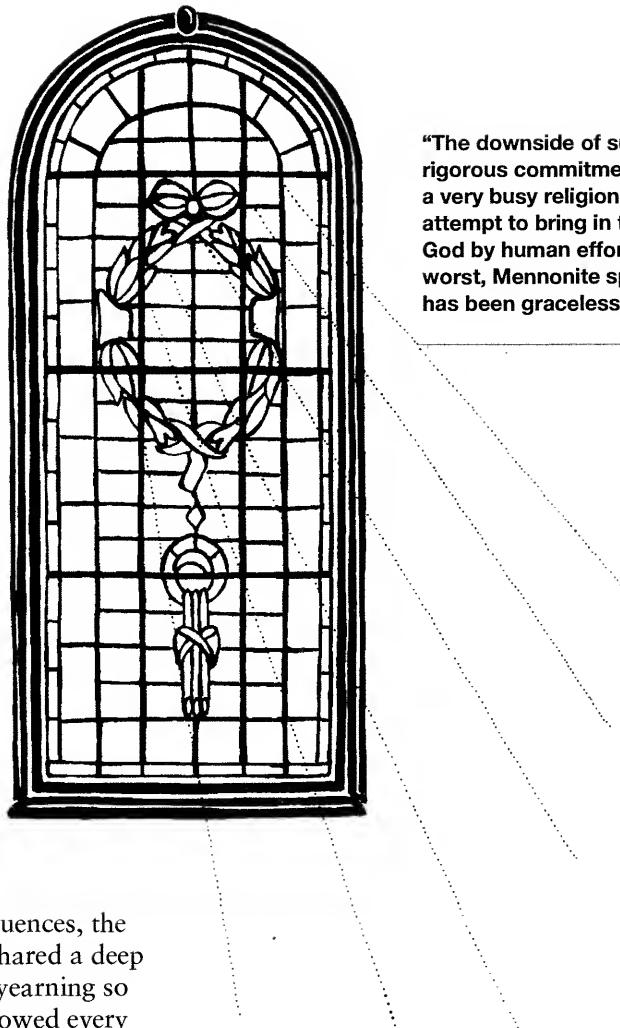
This article was adapted from a presentation given at Elizabethtown College (Pa.) on December 3, 1997, for the series, "Catholics and Anabaptists in Conversation About Spirituality."

During the past year, I have asked a number of Mennonite women, "What attracts you to contemplative spirituality? Why are you drawn to the perspectives and practices of a spiritual tradition mediated to us mainly by Roman Catholics?"

Since the late 1960s a sizable group of Mennonites—both women and men—has been drawn to a stream of spirituality identified with the desert fathers and mothers of the early centuries of the church. Kept alive through the centuries by monastic communities, contemplative spirituality in recent years has sparked a renewal of prayer and a rediscovery of the gift of silence. It has reintroduced the ancient disciplines of spiritual friendship and spiritual direction and has spawned a retreat movement among Mennonites. How have we come to drink from this spiritual stream?

Mennonite women have come to this spiritual tradition by many paths. While many were taught as children and young people to be suspicious of Roman Catholics, they found themselves crossing paths with Catholic Christians in peace marches, in charismatic prayer groups, in overseas MCC assignments and—most importantly—in their reading. Contemporary writers such as Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen and Dorothy Day provided much-needed nourishment as did writers from the past such as Augustine, Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila. In addition, certain Protestant writers such as Elizabeth O'Connor, Madeleine L'Engle and Richard Foster interpreted contemplative spirituality in ways Mennonites could understand.

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"The downside of such rigorous commitment is often a very busy religion—an attempt to bring in the reign of God by human effort. At its worst, Mennonite spirituality has been graceless."

Beyond these external influences, the women I interviewed all shared a deep inner hunger for God—a yearning so pervasive that it overshadowed every other reality in their lives. When one woman went back to reread her journals from college days, she found she had written, “I want God so bad, I can taste it.”

Many of these women would be what William James in *Varieties of Religious Experience* calls “twice born” people. Unlike the once-born, whose spiritual experience grows gradually and sustains them their whole life long, the twice-born find themselves on an intense spiritual quest. So where does a Mennonite woman go with that sort of longing? We have no mystical tradition, no one to guide us into contemplative prayer, and no one to teach us about communion with God that goes beyond conventional understandings.

What such Mennonites usually do is go to work. Our Spirituality has sometimes been called a *Lenten* spirituality with discipleship as our most pervasive theme. We have little interest in a faith that is not expressed in daily life—work, family, personal ethics, community life and faith must be one integrated whole.

The downside of such rigorous commitment is often a very busy religion—an attempt to bring in the reign of God by human effort. At its worst, Mennonite spirituality has been graceless. God is a Taskmaster, a supreme Judge whom we can never please. We are doomed forever to stand guilty before such an exacting and demanding potentate.

Even our prayer is busy. We easily enter into intercessory prayer. Most of us can talk to God. Few of us know how to listen to God.

We study the Bible as a textbook. We outline chapters and do word-studies. Eventually we may learn source criticism and form criticism and text criticism. But we may not know that the Bible is really a love letter.

And so one day a tired, restless Mennonite woman, worn out from doing good works, makes her way to a Catholic retreat center. It is quiet there. There are beautiful windows in the chapel. Her soul is starved for beauty. She watches the sunlight dance in the room—rays of light tinged with the red, gold and cobalt of the windows.

She hears simple, meditative, prayerful music—Gregorian chants or more recent chants from the community of Taizé.

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The harmonies of Taizé are familiar to anyone who has grown up with four-part *a capella* singing, so she begins to sing. Then she begins to pray. And then she weeps.

She walks in the retreat center garden or in the nearby woods. It is permissible to take a walk in the *middle* of the day. Such freedom. Her retreat director says she can even take a *nap* in the middle of the day! Unheard of.

She meets Mary—and finds a sister.

She tastes bread and wine. And she meets Christ—friend, lover, mother, father, healer, reconciler, bringer of justice, and the one who reassures her, “All shall be well.”

Touched by divine grace, she falls in love with her Creator and Redeemer and begins to drink deeply from this stream that has opened her eyes to the mystery and glory of God.

Mennonite women describe five gifts of the contemplative stream which have enriched and sustained their spirituality.

God

Though citing *God* as a gift of this tradition may seem overly obvious, it bears mentioning. Historically, Mennonites have loved Jesus but have sometimes had trouble with God. What women rediscover in the contemplative tradition is a more whole vision of both a transcendent and immanent God.

Because Mennonite women tend to internalize inadequate, distorted images of God, they respond positively to the expanded images of God found in contemplative spirituality. Long before Christian feminism taught us to see God in more than masculine or hierarchical ways, Christian mystics, ancient and modern, explored the richness of biblical imagery. For example, Julian of Norwich wrote of a “courteous, laughing God” and of “Jesus, our mother, in whom we are endlessly born” (see John 3 for the source of the image). Theresa of Avila used water imagery for her relationship with God. She said God “lets loose the streams, which with a powerful rush flow into the cistern and a mighty wave rises, strong enough to raise on high the little vessel of our soul.”

Mennonite contemplatives also speak of healing that happens through contemplative prayer. One said, “I’ve returned now to my early childhood image of God. God had been disfigured along the way.” Another spoke of God as “the yearning lover of the Song of Songs.” One compared her relationship with God to “a child sitting in her mother’s lap.” Another said she sees herself walking with God, their hands clasped. She said, “With God I dare to be who I am. I am called by name.” For another, the most potent image of God was darkness, but it was the darkness of a womb.

Another expansion of the image of God comes in the discovery of the fathomless love and grace of God. One Mennonite woman spoke of a startling new awareness that grew out of contemplative reflection on Scripture. She came to understand just a fraction of what is meant in Romans 8:38–39 in its ringing affirmation that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Through that text she came to realize that there was nothing she could *do* or *not do* that would stop the flow of God’s love into her life. God’s love is offered freely; all she has to do is receive it.

The experience of limited forgiveness is common for Mennonite women. Without public rituals such as confession or the Eucharist, it is difficult for many to *know* they are forgiven. One woman told of attending Roman Catholic worship for about a year. She received permission to participate in the Eucharistic celebration and found the high point of Sunday morning worship was the prayer the congregation prayed just before communion: “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.” As a Mennonite, she knew about the “unworthy” part, but she hadn’t known about the “only say the word . . .” part. In that year she found herself surrounded by the grace of God; she reveled in the grace of God as she received the broken bread, drank from the cup, and was healed.

Guidance for prayer and meditation on Scripture

A second gift of the contemplative tradition is the guidance or tools offered for deepening our relationship with God. Among these tools are silence, a variety of

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forms of prayer (including centering prayer, guided imagery, colloquy or dialogue, the consciousness examen) and particularly *Lectio Divina*. All these tools provide ways to listen to God, to be *with* God, not to be *busy* with God. They balance our activism and give our work a joyful spirit rooted in love. What contemplative prayer offers is an opportunity to *be*, to cease from doing.

The great gift of the contemplative tradition is silence. In a cluttered, wordy world, Mennonite women long for quiet. One said, "When I first went on retreats, what I most needed was rest. I could stop, let the clamor cease." Surrounded by silence, she became aware of a growing desire to pay attention to God. She said, "I discovered there really was more with less."

Among the important tools for prayer, contemplative spirituality offers tools for praying with Scripture. For Mennonites our biblical emphasis has focused more on *information* than *formation*. We go to church or to Sunday school to learn about God, not to *experience* God. What Mennonite women find in the Benedictine tradition of *Lectio Divina* or in Ignatian contemplation is freedom to receive God's Word in many ways and on many levels: imagery; poetry; stories; a direct, personal word; or a word of guidance or correction.

One woman said, "With these approaches, I'm not being told: this is how you should *think* about this text." Instead of being intimidated by the word, women find their relationship to Scripture is life-giving. They learn to let the Word read them and their context—and in that experience, new life emerges.

Another woman said, "This emphasis on Scripture makes contemplative spirituality safe." When prayer and meditation stray from a secure biblical foundation, Mennonites become uneasy.

Symbolic worship

A third gift from our relationship with the contemplative tradition is symbolic worship. Historically, Mennonites have been a symbol-deprived and sacrament-deprived people. The closest we come to experiencing a sacrament in worship is our singing. When we sing, we taste God.

We touch God. But we don't really have words for that encounter. One Mennonite told me, "The only reason I don't become Catholic is Mennonite singing."

What Mennonite contemplatives say over and over again is, "I need the Eucharist. I need to commune with Christ and the body of Christ." But in our tradition, we starve ourselves.

Another symbolic dimension of worship to which Mennonite contemplatives are drawn is space—both the physical and emotional space of Catholic worship. One woman said, "We Mennonites are so sensible, so practical. We use our worship spaces for all kinds of activities. Cathedral space isn't used for other things. It is where God and the people meet." Though there may be many good reasons for building multipurpose spaces, giving priority to meeting God—for the sake of meeting, not to accomplish something else—is an alien idea for many Mennonites.

Community

A fourth gift of contemplative spirituality is community. Historically, of course, Mennonites have *majored* in community. So why should this be one of the reasons Mennonites are attracted to contemplative spirituality?

In the first place, the contemplative tradition offers us a *larger* community—the whole Christian church, including the desert fathers and mothers, medieval mystics, and contemporary peace activists whose work is rooted in prayer—not just the slice of Christian history since the Reformation and our own little piece of that slice. As a tiny minority people, we need to belong to something larger.

Contemplative spirituality also gives us a tradition of *women* spiritual guides and mentors: theologians, teachers of prayer, wise women leaders. Prior to this century, we have had almost no writings of women in our tradition—a few letters written by women in prison who were martyred in the early days of the Anabaptist movement, a scrap here and there. We have almost no history of women as community leaders or spiritual guides—no Hildegard or Julian or Teresa or Catherine. Bereft of women role models, we find hope and sustenance in the writings and stories of women in the contemplative spiritual tradition.

Women in ministry

Vicki Penner was ordained as associate pastor at Faith Mennonite Church, Newton, Kan.

Tina Schlabach is pastor at Shalom Mennonite Fellowship, Tucson, Ariz.

Lisa Enns-Bogoya was licensed as associate pastor for youth and young adults at North Goshen Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind.

Another dimension of this tradition puts a face on community often missing in present day Mennonite spirituality: the face of *spiritual direction*. Though Anabaptists have a theology and history of accountability, mutual admonition and encouragement, we don't really practice it very well at the end of the 20th century. But Mennonites know in our guts that we need others. We *cannot be Christian alone*, even in individualistic North America. All of us need a place to confess our sins and hear the words of absolution: You are forgiven. We need to be encouraged, prayed for. All this we find in spiritual direction, a practice we have borrowed from the contemplative tradition.

While we cherish and value community, we often find ourselves torn between our love for community and the relentless, overwhelming demands of community. One woman reflected, "Maybe community has hindered our spirituality. We depend on others' relationships with God. Community can be controlling as well as supportive; it may try to put us in the same mold. Community is often the bearer of judgment."

In such a context, solitude is welcome. When we find solitude, Mennonite contemplatives discover it is *home*. In solitude we are given permission to explore our inner life, face our darkness, listen to our dreams, do grief work, find our true voice and pay attention to God. Eventually we discover that what the mystics called "*Gelassenheit*"—that capacity to yield ourselves fully to God, allowing all other attachments and loyalties to take their place in relationship to that central commitment. Paradoxical as it may seem, the richness of both solitude and community is a gift to us from the contemplative tradition.

An earthy spirituality

Contemplative spirituality is sometimes criticized for being otherworldly. Yet one quality that draws Mennonite women to contemplative spirituality is its earthiness. Many Mennonites of rural background have learned to grow vegetable gardens, cook hearty meals, can and freeze our harvests, sew, quilt and keep clean houses. Unless spirituality touches these dimensions of life, it makes no sense to us. Contemplative spirituality is sacramental. In its deep appreciation for the created world, it dissolves the distance between the sacred and profane. God can be

revealed in any human activity—whether that is mothering, tossing a salad, dusting a dining room table, cleaning up after an earthquake, or singing a beautiful song.

Contemplative spirituality is also profoundly committed to praying and working for peace and justice in the nitty-gritty arenas of daily life. Such commitments connect easily with Anabaptist perspectives.

Conclusion

Renewed and expanded images of God, guidance in prayer, the satisfactions of symbol-rich worship, both community and solitude, and an earthy spirituality—all these gifts of contemplative spirituality have enriched the faith and spiritual experience of Mennonite women.

There is a time for Lent—for discipleship, for taking the journey to the cross. But that is not the whole of the Christian calendar; nor is it the whole of our relationship with God. Perhaps part of the attraction of contemplative spirituality is that it offers Mennonites an *Advent* spirituality—a spirituality of waiting, quiet hope, expectant joy and wondrous mystery. We can be grateful for the abundant gifts God offers us—both through our own tradition and through traditions beyond ours. May God give us all a deeper desire for communion with Christ and make us whole.

Marlene lives in Elkhart, Ind., where she works as Minister of Worship and Spirituality at Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministries and also as Assistant Professor of Spiritual Formation and Worship at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS). As part of her assignment at AMBS, she provides spiritual direction for students. She and her husband Stanley are members of Belmont Mennonite Church. They are parents of two adult children, Jeremy and Heather. In her spare time, she enjoys sailing with her husband and flower-gardening. Her current project is an English-style perennial garden.



"Our bodies carry within them the memories of our past. Our bodies know things as well as our minds. Through feelings and physical sensations, our bodies try to tell us what they know."

"The pain," she says, "is the physical part of Wally that is still with you."

I like that idea. The pain, then, is a friend, not an enemy. I will no longer ward it off but welcome it when it washes over me. When I grieve, Wally is with me yet.

This re-visioning of a body experience was the single most helpful practice that allowed me to move on in my grief. Although I wasn't able to pray for months, I am sure that God was involved in this work.

I have learned that our bodies carry within them the memories of our past. Our bodies know things as well as our minds. Through feelings and physical sensations, our bodies try to tell us what they know. There are stories waiting to be told and memories waiting to be revisited.

Focusing exercise

This exercise is from a hand-out on focusing by Ann McGlone

1. Become quiet. Become aware of your breathing.
2. Let your attention move into your body.
3. Notice anything that feels like it especially needs your attention right now (e.g. headache, tiredness, anxiety, fear, joy, connectedness).
4. Ask yourself, "Is it okay to be with this for a moment?"
5. Perhaps ask the feeling itself, "How do you need me to be with you?" or "Is there anything you need me to know?"
6. If this place knows what it needs, just take a few moments being with it in whatever way feels right. Many times just noticing is enough.
7. After you have become aware of the memory, symbol or word that your body wants to share, respectfully let this place know, "I need to stop for now, but if you need more of my attention later I will return and be with you." Perhaps ask this place, "How do you need me to carry you in my body until we can be together again?"
8. Take a moment to just say, "Thank you. I will not forget you are there."

by Claire Ewart Fisher

Exercises for the body and soul

As I prepare to write this story my body remembers all too well the events in my life which precipitated the beginning of an incredible journey. I light my candle and become aware of God's Spirit present within me.

The time of year is April, the place is Saskatchewan. The snow is fast disappearing, uncovering the brown remains of last year's growth. The birds return singing in celebration of life. And I remember the single most painful experience of my life.

It's seven years ago. It's a Monday evening, and I am at a community college class. It is the third Monday of my husband's employment at a job two hours away from home. At home, my teenage son gets the call. He hands it off to his sister. She then reaches me at my computer class, and says, "I have bad news. They found dad slumped over on his desk. They think that he suffered a heart attack."

As I rush home to my children, I think about our seven years of work in Asia. We repeatedly put ourselves in situations of risk. We talked numerous times about the possibility of one of us not coming home from work one day. I know that today is that day. It is April 29.

Now I am alone. How can I live in a world without Wally? How can I parent my teenagers alone? What will I do with the rest of my life?

Two weeks later the postmistress asks me about my pain. "It rests just above my left breast," I say. "It prevents me from breathing deeply."

"We talked numerous times about the possibility of one of us not coming home from work one day. I know that today is that day."

The Spirit of God is able to work as we attend to our body sensations. When we listen to the stories caught up in our tissues, God's grace transforms the painful, stress-filled memories into memories which give us new life. God is actively creating something new within us.

Now when I feel the pain over my left breast, I may still shed some tears. But it is not as intense or frequent as it once was. I believe God's grace has changed that pain, reshaped that memory into a gift which tells the story of a beautiful love relationship.

The exercise above is just one of many that have guided me through a particularly difficult time in my life. My journey began in loneliness and sorrow, and it has brought me to many beautiful places of freedom and joy. It is a journey to the center of my being where God makes Godself known to me. It is a journey to a relationship with Creator God who seeks to help me become the person I am meant to be.

Through work with a spiritual director I continue to recognize God's activity in my life. Through the discipline of the Ignatian Exercises, I experience a God who speaks. Through praying with the aid of my imagination, I know real joy.

One rather profound prayer experience happened when I was single. I was particularly lonely and longed to be special to someone. In the intimacy of prayer, as I meditated on John 3:23–33, I began to know God as Lover.

Exercise

This exercise is from *Love as Guide for Prayer* by Jacqueline Syrup Bergan and S. Marie Schwan

1. See yourself as a candle flame burning brightly. You have been burning for a long time and your flame is strong and casts a warm, beautiful glow.
2. Suddenly a brilliant light appears as if from a lighthouse. The light permeates and warms the entire space.
3. You feel yourself being absorbed by the light. Your own flame seems to grow smaller and smaller until it is barely visible.

4. Relax in the glow; allow yourself to be embraced and held with its radiance.
5. Focus on Jesus as Light, and very quietly repeat the name of Jesus. Close with prayer.

As I prayed this prayer, I noticed many other flames in the room with me. But I longed to be valued as special and to be alone with someone who cared. So the other flames were invited to the next room. They could be seen through the doorway. But God answered my need. I was alone with the One I love—with the One who loves me. I began to know myself as someone who is complete in relationship with God.

I am still at the beginning of my incredible journey. The ways to approach God are endless: praying with my imagination; praying with words; praying the Scriptures; silent meditation; awareness of God as I engage in activities I enjoy (and some I don't). I have learned that God is always present.

Simone Weil writes, "Through joy the beauty of the world penetrates the soul, through pain it penetrates the body. We can no more become friends with God through joy alone than we can become a ship's captain by studying books on navigation. The body has a part in all our apprenticeships."

I have learned that I am an integrated whole, that I cannot divide myself up into physical, spiritual, emotional and social. With this more holistic understanding of myself, I am able to meet God working out at the gym, going for a walk, or listening to music. As long as I am conscious of God, I am in prayer, communicating with the Source of Being.

Claire tries to celebrate each day as it is given to her. To help her with that goal, she has Garth, Matt and Lara and a church full of friends. As a pastor and spiritual companion, she is continually challenged and rewarded for her efforts.

"Our prayer frees our theology to be an art form—a creative, rejuvenating gift. This gift reminds us that we are all diminished if any of us is diminished."

by Mary Lou Houser, with Laura Mueller

Conversation between a Mennonite and a Catholic

Dialing Laura's number that spring morning in 1989 was the most decisive moment in my longing for spiritual empowerment as a Mennonite woman. That spontaneous phone call to explore spiritual formation with a Catholic lay director has led me from the Anabaptist parameters of my childhood, through the forbidden fruits of Catholicism and beyond into the wonder of the Creator's heart-spirit. The emerging, seven-year commitment has animated not only my personal integration of art and faith but also my subsequent discernment affecting the next 50 years of my life.

I admit that the intentional evolution from a goal-oriented doer into a contemplative takes more than a lifetime, but I celebrate the paradigm shift that I began with Laura. Mennonite and Catholic together, we, along with others in the wider community of faith, are choosing to honor the way of love in our midst by relinquishing those traditional fears which have kept us apart.

During those seven years of meeting with Laura for regular spiritual direction, we have managed to meet in all sorts of settings. Today Laura and I are sitting in a booth at the noisy Red Rose Cafe during Laura's lunch break. My voice reaches her above the distractions.

Mary Lou: *Laura, how did you decide to become a spiritual director? Or should we back up to note what prompted your first involvement as a directee?*

Laura: I joined the Catholic faith in my early 20s, before spiritual direction was truly an option for lay people. It wasn't until after Vatican II in 1965 that lay people ever considered spiritual direction for themselves. Before Vatican II, direction was expected within religious communities, but most lay Catholics knew nothing about it.

ML: *So you, a Catholic woman, were venturing out onto unknown terrain much the same way I did as a Mennonite.*

L: Yes. My first retreat was in 1978. That was my first cognizant answer to God's call. And I was scared to death. It was a week of directed quiet retreat which I tried solo. I went to sort out God-voices from all the fatigue and other things I was experiencing. It opened all the questions that I wished had remained closed: "What is God calling me to?" "How do I listen?"

ML: *In the 20 years since then, what important challenges have faced you as a directee?*

L: 1) Courage to be alone with God in the same room and to be aware fully of that. 2) Transitions from one director to another for whatever the reasons—moves, schedule, etc. 3) Sensing the content that my spiritual director wanted to hear so that I could prepare for it ahead of time. The content of spiritual direction sessions is often related to therapy issues. Psychological and spiritual well-being are very close.

ML: *That underscores the integration that spiritual direction brings to our fragmented living. I was baffled sometimes with your inquiries that pushed me to consider new language, new ways to imagine and talk about my prayer. Then came a growing realization that my art was prayer in a most regenerative form—the culmination of time spent in silence.*

Is there one word that summarizes the goal of direction and your response to that?

L: God. Drawing closer to the magnetism of God.

ML: *How soon did you sense that you might have the gifts and the call to become a director yourself?*

L: During a two-year program for spiritual direction about five years after that first solo retreat, becoming a religious sister was on my mind. I wondered if I was being called to this work. My training as a Contact (a phone crisis hotline) volunteer was very important—my sensitivity and compassion with people emerged from that.

ML: *In my case, I felt my heart leading my mind. In our very first session together, you asked me, "What do you desire from God?" I replied intuitively, "I want to be at*

God's full disposal, to get increasingly close to the center of that creative Being." And then you cautioned me, "If you ask for that, it will happen." Sometimes you had a way of unnerving me with truth and candor.

Say more about what goes into the training for direction.

L: Knowledge and love of Scripture are key—in addition to daily contact with the sacred. I had a weekly seminar on prayer in the religious community, the Sisters of the Cenacle. There were nine months of weekly sessions on the spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola. While at the community we could take graduate courses at Duquesne University and at other academic and religious institutions. I took classes on Christology, Old and New Testament studies, social justice and the Psalms.

ML: Since your 1983 supervised practicum, you have accumulated a high percentage of Anabaptist directees.

L: Of the 14 directees I have worked with, six are Mennonites. I had four Roman Catholics, two Methodists, one Episcopalian and one United Church of Christ.

ML: How do you account for this Mennonite gravitation toward direction, particularly with a Catholic director?

L: The felt sense of the Holy was inadvertently left behind in the fray of the Reformation. Contemplative prayer may be uncharted waters for Mennonites. There are a tradition and body of writing that goes with the vocation of spiritual direction. The saints before the Reformation have given us signposts in their writing to assist us in direction. Apprenticeships in spiritual direction have been crucial for Catholics over the years.

ML: This has been largely inaccessible to Mennonites since 1525.

L: Yes. Why might Mennonites choose direction with a Catholic director in a Mennonite population center like Lancaster? I guess the idea has spread by word of mouth—from you!

ML: And for me it has been a rediscovery of my spiritual legacy in the Catholic tradition. I sensed a void that went beyond longing for stained glass, statuary and the Mass.



Ritual, beauty and sacramental living have become my daily prayer now apart from a "religious order."

How have you been impacted by the Anabaptist stream of spirituality?

L: When I moved to Lancaster in 1974, I began to get to know a few Mennonites personally, sharing food at their table, eating Zieger cheese from a heart shaped mold, being with them in their homes as well as in their places of worship. I learned to kneel at the benches for prayer in the plain meetinghouse among women in capes and coverings. I have an enormous respect for Mennonite peace and service commitment. I see how Paul's writings about faith and works find a place in the individual's spiritual life, like breathing.

I am learning how to connect the horizontal with the vertical, to link introspection with service. I believe I gave my first directee short shrift because of my lack of understanding of the place of works in Anabaptist spirituality.

ML: So the key benefits of our mutual discovery of each other are . . .

L: Peace. Peace for the "felt war" between our two traditions. As we come to know one another we learn that we both are human. We have a mutual history, tradition and respect—including respect for the Reformers and their grievances against the Catholic institution.

ML: You have mentioned reconciliation on a person-to-person basis, sharing worship and other experiences; do you foresee reconciliation between the two faith communities on a global scale?

L: I hope for that. In overseas missions both church communities have made mutual efforts and shared opportunities. We are slower to be peacemakers here. The view of communion is the sticking point for Catholics in the move toward ecumenism.

continued on page 14

ML: Does gender-inclusion have any bearing on this movement toward reconciliation?

L: How much time do you have?! As a result of Vatican II, the women's religious orders asked to return to their original "charism," or mission, to see how that fits with their actual role today. They asked, "What is the 21st century version of our mandate?"

It's easier to effect change in clothing than in leadership and vision. It remains a real challenge to the church to move conceptually from the "ladder" to the "wheel." The president of the Sisters of Mercy says, "You cannot ignore 50 percent of your parish."

ML: That common dilemma surely unites us as women and may help to explain the resurgence of spiritual formation among the female Mennonite laity in particular. The pain expressed in my prayers and in my artwork has been over the denigration of woman, earth and Creator Spirit. All have been marginalized by hierarchical Christianity.¹

If we trust prayer to be the context from which our vision and gifts emerge, then we are led together out of our fears into wholeness. Our prayer frees our theology to be an art form as well—a creative, rejuvenating gift. This gift reminds us that we are all diminished if any of us is diminished.

Mennonite and Catholic women find that in the silence of God, we discover our unique voices. These voices deserve to be heard.

Mary Lou Weaver Houser, a graduate student in holistic spirituality/spiritual direction at Chestnut Hill College, finds every excuse she can to be in her garden, a place for healing prayer. She shares the gardens with retreatants who come to the Herrbrook Farm Retreat Cottage, which Mary Lou and her husband, Rod, operate in rural Lancaster County, Pa. Mary Lou is an artist, educator and church elder who enjoys her two grown children, Ted and Amy.

Laura Mueller, childhood resident of western Kentucky, is a Methodist-turned-Catholic. Now a Lancaster City apartment dweller with her two "old lady" cats (one of whom snores loudly), Laura serves as a case manager with the Lancaster County Drug and Alcohol Commission.

1. This concept comes from Elizabeth A. Johnson's *Woman, Earth, Creator Spirit* (Paulist Press, 1993).

by Mary Beth Lind

Finding new wine skins for new wine

Spiritual formation and spiritual direction are words that have only been a part of my life for the last 15 to 18 years, yet the concepts have been there all my life. Spiritual formation and direction are about the universal longing for God that St. Augustine so eloquently described in his prayer, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee."

I have always stretched definitions or been stretched by them. Early in my development I realized that I was a woman with "traditional male gifts of leadership and administration." It took me a long time to thank God for both my gender and my gifts. That is in part why traditional definitions have not worked for me.

My spiritual pilgrimage was deeply influenced by some of the lifestyle choices my husband and I made. We chose to work part-time, to live in a rural area, to live a simple and sustainable lifestyle, and to have no children.

As I gardened, canned and baked bread, I reflected, meditated and pondered things in my heart. I also read a lot, especially on long winter evenings. I was drawn to the contemplatives, the mystics, the spirituality of Brother Lawrence, the Benedictines and others who combined manual work and prayer. Thomas Merton speaks of coming to the simple lifestyle through his prayer. I came at prayer through my simple lifestyle.

But I longed for more. I wanted training in spirituality. I wanted a teacher. My first step was to find a spiritual friend who would share the journey with me. We met monthly to share with each other our lives, our spirit and our prayer. That was good but I still found myself longing for something more.

"Because of my own experience of rejection, I can connect with the 'misfit' who does not fit the typical spiritual mold."

I took several classes at a seminary and at secular universities on personality and faith development. The more I understood myself, the better I could be present to God in my prayer. With this training I was also able to be more present to people who were coming to me for spiritual friendship or direction.

I began looking for a program that taught spiritual direction. At that time there was nothing available in the Mennonite church. So I looked at a Methodist program offered by the Upper Room. It was a good program, but I dropped out. I regret that I didn't stick with it, but at the time it felt too "method-ist," and I didn't fit the method. Would I ever fit? Did I always come at things backwards?

I finally settled on a Catholic program, though it felt too Catholic. With the help of a dear Quaker friend, the only other non-Catholic in the program, I survived and "graduated." I learned a lot. In fact I don't think I am totally aware of how much I learned.

About that time my husband, Lester, and I started Mountain Retreat, a small retreat center where we offer space—physical and spiritual—for people to spend time with God. We offer hospitality and spiritual direction. We share the connections we have found between the spiritual and the organic sources of life.

In spiritual direction, I only give what I have received. While it ultimately comes from God, the giver of all spiritual direction, what I offer comes through me—through both my true self created in the image of God

and my false self constrained by my ego. My own experiences of being a misfit, my study in personality and faith development, and my education in spiritual formation have influenced my own growth and what I offer to others.

One of the keys to spiritual formation and spiritual direction is self-knowledge. I have found tools like Myers-Briggs personality testing and the Enneagram to be very helpful. Keeping a journal and reviewing it regularly are also tools for self-knowledge and spiritual growth.

In my own search, I kept feeling I was innately wrong until I realized that most spiritual formation programs and books on spirituality and spiritual direction are conceived by persons with the Myers-Briggs personality type of Intuitive/Feeling (NF) although NF's make up only 12 percent of the total population. As a non-NF working in spirituality I felt like a misfit. I was pressured to force my experience into a mold. I was relieved of teaching responsibilities in a spiritual formation program largely because I couldn't or wouldn't articulate my faith in "orthodox" ways. Now, I think of that as quenching the Spirit. To force myself into a mold different from the image of God that God has given me is insolence and foolishness.

However, God can work all things for good. As a result of my own struggle to find a place, my call has been to offer hospitality to others, both physical and spiritual hospitality. The homegrown produce, homemade soups and fresh-baked whole-grain breads, which have been part of my prayer, now nurture the pilgrim who comes to my door. I also offer the warmth and nurture of acceptance in the spirit of Jesus. Because of my own experience of rejection, I can connect with the "misfit" who does not fit the typical spiritual mold.

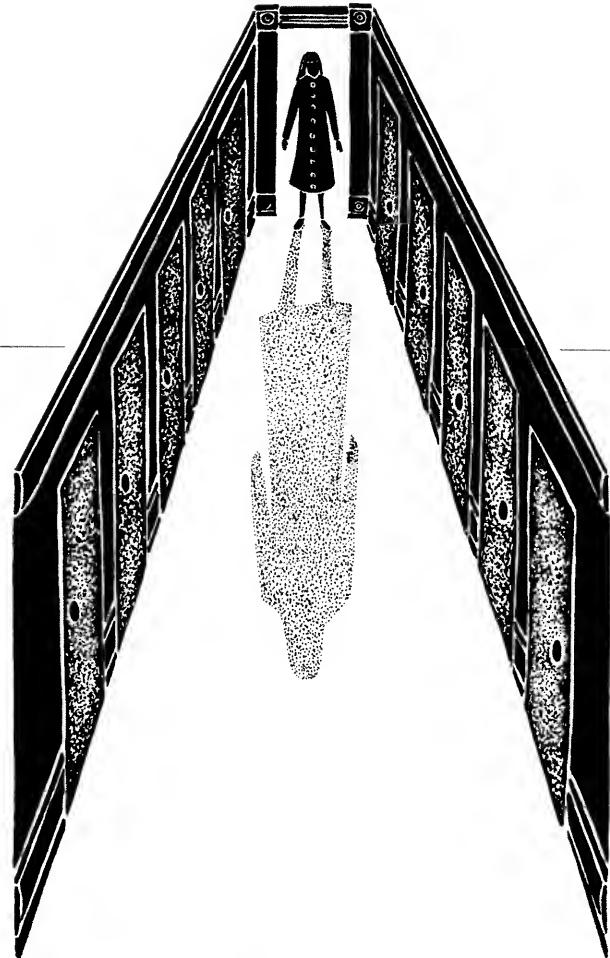
Just as my garden requires constant care, so the garden of my soul requires diligence. If I am to have anything to offer others I must nurture



myself. In our rural setting, there are no nearby spirituality programs and few like-minded people. However, God has met me in the creative variety of nature, in the writings of old and new saints and in the simplicity of rural life. With limited distractions and no television there are many hours available for reading and prayer.

I find companions for the journey in my church family, friends and spiritual director. I visit my spiritual director once a month. I have had various spiritual directors—Methodist, Quaker, Mennonite and Catholic, men and women. I believe strongly that one must listen to her inner voice to determine what she needs in a spiritual director. It is easy to choose what one thinks she *should* want rather than choosing what will nurture the image of God within her. I am reminded of the blessing between Elizabeth and Mary in Luke 1:45, “Blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.” I want for myself, and I want to give to others, this blessing that helps each of us believe that the promise made to us by our Lord will be fulfilled. There are no misfits in God’s Kingdom. God is all and in all.

Mary Beth is co-director of Mountain Retreat, a small retreat center in the mountains of West Virginia. She attends a house church, Philippi Mennonite Church. Baking, gardening and enjoying nature occupy her time when she is not doing nutrition consulting as a dietitian.



by Barbara Mast

Journeying with God

God's greatest glory is a person fully alive, according to St. Ireneus. Moving toward a deeper intimacy with God is the only way a person can become more fully alive. I look back on my own spiritual journey and see a path with many valleys, peaks and deserts. Many times I did not notice or pay attention to God, but now I realize God was there all the time, waiting in patience. Much of the time my focus was on my own common sense, strength and self-sufficiency.

A Chinese lay preacher, when asked what impressed him most in America, replied without hesitation, “What you are able to accomplish without God!” He explained, “It seems that you have allowed yourselves to be molded by the world around you until there is very little difference in the way you live.”

I felt that tension of being too influenced by society. In my heart I longed for something more. God honored my desire. God's perfect wisdom and timing led me to a place where I could begin to peel off layers of deadness and open my heart to God's aliveness.

"Intimacy is not so much a mutual attachment to each other as a shared attachment to God through Jesus Christ. My spiritual director is a guide who always points beyond herself to the Kingdom."

I began a more serious search for God when I signed up for a year at the School of Spiritual Formation in Wernersville, Pa. During that year at Wernersville, my focus slowly changed from having an agenda of my own to moving in God's timetable. I had been a Christian for most of my life so I did not think I was a beginner. I soon realized that was exactly what I was. Thomas Merton said, "We don't want to be beginners, but we will never be anything else all our life!" It is humbling to always be a beginner, but it's also freeing. I can be myself without pretense. I can give to God as much as I know of myself. I am continually waiting on God to reveal more of myself to me so I can in turn give it back to God.

Although I learned many things that year, I knew it was only a beginning. I saw myself standing in a long hallway with many doors extending endlessly. The doors would not open unless I knocked. At the end of year one I wrestled over what to do next. My desire for God was strong so I chose to risk opening the next door. I signed up for another year of school and decided to meet with a spiritual director during the year.

At first I dismissed my own need for spiritual direction. I had many objections. I was satisfied with how my life was proceeding. Wasn't I beginning year two of school? I would need to open myself to another. Would I be comfortable being vulnerable? I wanted to surrender to God's call, but I was afraid. I struggled, prayed and finally listened to my heart.

The most often repeated commandment in the Bible is, "Fear not! Be not afraid!" Brother David Steindl-Rast in *Gratefulness, The Heart of Prayer* says, "Faith courageously sets out toward the promised land, but fear holds on to anything it can get hold of, and so it weighs us down, slows us down. Faith is courage to let go. Fear clings." It was a step of faith for me to let go and open the door to spiritual direction.

As I began my first session, I felt I was entering a new adventure and I had some doubts and apprehensions. We spoke briefly of how God was working in my life. My spiritual director asked me to be in silence with God and notice how God was looking at me. To actually feel God's presence is an awesome thing. She asked me to notice how God was looking at a particular event and to meditate on that. As we spent time in silence, just waiting

in the presence of God, I heard God ask me a pointed question. At first I was startled that I would hear a still, small voice. My response was one of fear, but the feeling I got from God was that God still loved me unconditionally and would lovingly wait for me to receive His grace to overcome the fear.

My spiritual director helps me discern movements of the Holy Spirit in my life. St. Augustine said, "No one can walk without a guide." I would have missed many connections with God if I had no guide to walk with me. The evil one knows that we are vulnerable by ourselves and would rather have us flounder alone on our spiritual journey. But we become strong by helping one another.

Through spiritual direction I feel the beginning of a bonding process which is drawing me toward God and others. God's continual call to "come" is met with joy rather than resistance because fear is beginning to dissolve as trust develops. I may take two steps forward and one back, but I am making progress, knowing someone is walking with me, holding me accountable and keeping me on the right track. I see my spiritual director as a spiritual friend and mentor. Intimacy is not so much a mutual attachment to each other as a shared attachment to God through Jesus Christ. She is a guide who always points beyond herself to the Kingdom. I thank God for giving me the grace and courage to open myself to a spiritual guide. I will follow God's leading in becoming a guide as the opportunity comes.

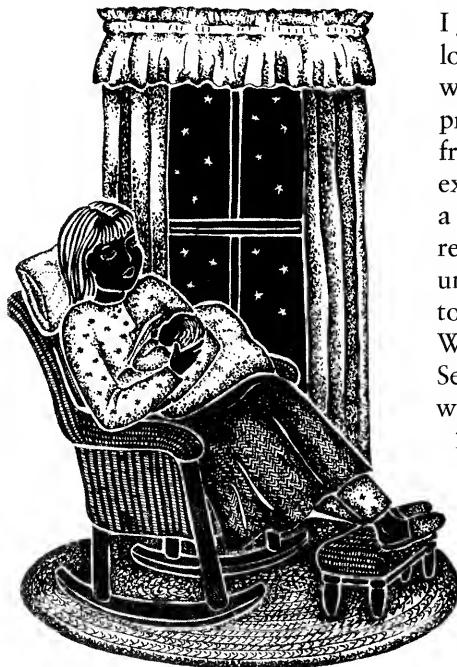
Barbara attends Lititz Mennonite Church. She teaches Religious Education in the Warwick Public School District, and her course is offered at the church weekly. Barbara is a retired elementary school teacher. She served with MCC in Nigeria from 1966 to 1969. She is currently a student at the Kairos School of Spiritual Formation and has just completed her second year.

"The long corridors, high ceilings and quiet spaces there create an atmosphere for reflection. The lush mountainous grounds provide a sense of God's awesome splendor and majesty."

"Suzanna Wesley used to stop in the middle of her kitchen filled with children and throw her apron over her head to create an instant 'prayer closet.' I was 'apronless' and remained stuck on how to find a place in the midst of it all to spend time with God."

by Judy Albrecht-Bunting

Embracing the journey of spiritual formation



or life was less hectic, or the kids were grown, I would miss one of my greatest opportunities—sharing and living Christ on a deeper level with my family.

Last September, I began my journey in the School of Spiritual Formation at the Jesuit Center in Wernersville, Pa. The long corridors, high ceilings and quiet spaces there create an atmosphere for reflection. The lush mountainous grounds provide a sense of God's awesome splendor and majesty.

In groups we share our spiritual journeys. We laugh and cry and love each other's company. In times of solitude we pray, reflect, journal, contemplate or stroll through the mountains. I find it unnatural to slow down my pace, lower my voice and be in silence, but I am ready to embrace these disciplines. Life at home is less than serene.

I grew up in a home with loving, Christian parents who put their faith into practice. This provided a framework for experiencing God's love in a personal way. But in retrospect I had little understanding of attending to the inner life. During a Women's Missionary and Service Commission workshop in the spring of 1996, I heard about "spiritual formation." I knew this was what my heart longed for. I wanted to be a positive spiritual influence to my family *now*. I knew if I waited until finances eased,

In 1991, after receiving my master's degree in social work, when I was pregnant with our second child, my husband and I decided I would stay at home full time. When our second child arrived he was very active. I felt I was playing "beat the clock" when he napped. I was overwhelmed by decisions about which unattended task to focus on and often just returned to bed myself to catch up on some denied rest. I recalled reading that Suzanna Wesley used to stop in the middle of her kitchen filled with children and throw her apron over her head to create an instant "prayer closet." I was "apronless" and remained stuck on how to find a place in the midst of it all to spend time with God. I was aware of my longing to get "back on track" but felt swept away by the demands of the day. I was out of touch with the very source that I needed to renew me for the day.

In 1993, the book *Disciplines of the Inner Life* was like water to a thirsty land, and I soaked it in. I decided to "make time" for my new journey with God. I gave it my day's choicest hour—my toddler's nap time. I began journaling again, only this time the focus was on my spiritual journey. I was becoming ready to surrender what I was able to give to God. I trusted that God would meet me there.

Then came baby number three. By then my second child no longer took naps, and there wasn't any time in the day that I had a break from childcare. I lost my set time for meditation, prayer and journaling. I knew I needed that, but I was just surviving with my recovery limitations and homemaking.

Yet I was being provided with rest stops in my very full life. I had the wonderful experience of nursing each of our three children. While the feeding schedule became intense at times and restricted my activities, nursing stands out as one of my most cherished parts of the infancy stage. Nursing forced me to slow down and to *just be* many times a day and throughout the night. With our first child I soon learned to put reading material at several nursing stations around the house. As our baby settled into a feeding position, I looked forward to the feeding I too would receive through reading and meditation. During the feedings in the dark of the night, my heart offered prayers for my family and loved ones. I reflected on the wonderful blessing I was holding in my arms. I often felt bathed in the love and care of God and allowed that to

"As our baby settled into a feeding position, I looked forward to the feeding I too would receive through reading and meditation. During the feedings in the dark of the night, my heart offered prayers for my family and loved ones."

literally flow through me to our receiving and dependant infant. We were both growing from the nourishment we were receiving. Indeed God was faithful in meeting us right where we were.

My ever-present hunger to go deeper in my spiritual journey became more clear to me. I was ready to believe it was possible to be more in tune with God in the middle of everyday life. How was I to pay the high price of practicing and experiencing any of these core "disciplines of the desert" that yielded the spiritual growth I longed for? I realized how much I needed what spiritual disciplines offered. I often lacked the patience and energy I needed on a daily basis. With the responsibilities of home, supporting my husband and child care, had I given up my ability to pursue spiritual disciplines? Was I to wait for another season of my life when the children were older? Or was there indeed childcare in the desert?

In *Finding God at Home*, Ernest Boyer states, "Living the sacrament of care for others draws a person closest to the greatest of all truths. It does this better than anything else can, but it does this in ways seldom obvious. It is for this reason it is a spiritual discipline" (Boyer, 69).

Boyer continues, "Care is accomplished in the routine and the ordinary. It is washing, cooking, driving—many acts small in themselves (and all the more difficult to take seriously for that very reason) piled one on top of the other, day after day, week after week without change. It is the bland and repetitious part of life at the center that seems its greatest defect; the reality of a life of care often seems as far from spirituality as possible. It is true that it is the greatest burden of this life, but it is not true that it is far from spirituality. Spirituality is what draws a person closer to God, which means that it is also what draws a person closer to his or her own humanness, since it is in that that God's will is expressed in each of our lives. Spirituality is anything that reveals how close God is to us—as close as our hands, as close as our heart" (Boyer, 76).

I'm learning when my impatience and criticalness come out, God is actually *in* my caring about that sin. In fact, God is the one who is drawing me to desire transformation in those areas. This is a wonderful realization.



This October, I started my second year at the School of Spiritual Formation. This year's focus is on deepening spiritual formation and opening ourselves to becoming "God's work of art." I'm learning that as I attend to the inner life and silence within, my daily interactions are affected. I've started seeing the yellow traffic light as a time to pause, thanking God that I belong to Him. Richard Foster states, "We cultivate the habit of a Godward-directed mind and heart. As we carry on the business of the day, inwardly we keep pressing in toward the center. At every opportunity we place our mind before God with inward confessions and petitions" (Foster, 71).

Making the commitment to be involved in the spiritual formation program has granted me the time and space to listen to my deep spiritual desires. This has led to increased awareness and intentional practicing of these disciplines in my daily life.

Richard Foster encourages, "Remember God knows the intentions of your heart. The promises and commitments of your heart are not made in vain. God is working at the desire level of your formation. He has a way of bringing to pass the longings deep within—after all, he placed those longings there!" (Foster, 69).

I'm so grateful to be on this journey. I want to continue to strive for deeper communion with God, embracing the longings He has placed within my heart.

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Boyer, Ernest. *Finding God at Home: Family Life as a Spiritual Discipline*. New York: Harper, 1989.

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Judy Albrecht-Bunting and her husband Marv live in Pocomoke City, Md., where Judy is home full time with their three children, Levi, Micah and Abby. Judy attends Holly Grove Mennonite church where she is active in Mennonite Women and serves on the Mentor/Youth team. She enjoys sports, loves to walk, and is involved in a walking prayer ministry throughout the streets in her area.

WOMEN'S CONCERN REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committees on Women's Concerns. We believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns.

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Letter

A word of affirmation on the editing of a wonderful July-August issue of *Women's Concerns Report!* I so much appreciated the balance in the issue. Of course, there will always be those persons who believe the homosexual voice was too loud in this issue—but let us remember whose voice has not been heard prior to this issue.

Thanks for working, praying, dialoguing and deliberating at length before publishing this issue. Thanks for the last paragraph in your front page article that elucidated the

specific intent of this issue—to provide a forum for these stories, not to present a church or MCC position statement. It's very important to articulate your purpose—not just assume readers will discover it! Your intent was clear to me. If there is criticism, let it be that MCC has been prayerful, intentional, and deliberate in our dealings with this divisive issue.

Blessings to you.

—Julia Gerber, Sugarcreek, Oh.



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